

The Reflective Performance Review at CELE: A Rationale

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INTRODUCTION

In this article I will outline the process of and rationale behind a performance review system developed for the Center for English Language Education (CELE) at Asia University. Throughout this paper, I will also provide my own observations and insights into the effects I perceive this process has had upon the department and its teachers. The process outlined in the following pages was first developed and implemented in January 1999, at the end of my first term as vice director. It has undergone several adaptations and, as a life-long learner of teaching and teacher development, I still consider it to be a work in progress. The rationale behind each version, however, remains constant.

THE REFLECTIVE PERFORMANCE REVIEW

The reflective performance review developed for CELE consists of two parts: a three-section document, known as the performance review form (see Appendix), to be completed by each visiting faculty member (VFM) and the vice director, and a meeting with the vice director to discuss the contents of the document. The first two sections of the performance review form, entitled *Teaching* and *Program*, consist of a list of work-related items or sub-sections. *Teaching* sub-sections address such areas as lesson planning, achieving program goals and classroom practice (methods, pacing, use of resources etc.). *Program* sub-sections address such areas as professional behavior in the office, committee work and projects. VFMs consider each item and write in detail about

their own work in relation to each topic. There is also space for the vice director to write comments. The third section of the form, entitled *Goals*, requires each VFM to set personal work-related goals and outline a plan for achieving those goals.

THE PROCESS

The reflective performance review is designed to be implemented toward the end of each semester and to follow the following procedures. 1) Each VFM reflects upon various aspects of their work, as outlined in the performance review form, and makes notes. For example, the performance review form asks the VFM to comment on their lesson planning, considering such things as short- and long-term goals, variation of activities and addressing different learning styles. The VFM then writes in detail about their lesson planning, outlining how they how they address the aforementioned areas. 2) The vice director meets with each VFM. 3) During the meeting the VFM shares his/her reflections as the vice director listens. 4) Throughout the meeting, the vice director listens, clarifies when necessary, and comments on the information from the VFM, offering feedback, reinforcement and suggestions. 5) The VFM sets personal professional development goals and a plan for action with the assistance and approval of the vice director (see Appendix, *Goals* section). For example, a VFM might set a goal to increase the amount of English used for real communication among students in their Freshman English classes. The plan would then outline what steps the VFM will take to achieve that goal. 6) The VFM has a chance to reflect upon these goals and report on their progress during the next performance review. 7) During the spring performance review, when a classroom visit by the vice director becomes part of the process, the class is discussed

before all other items. First, the VFM reflects on the lesson. The vice director then asks questions to guide the VFM toward deeper reflection on the class and finally makes comments or suggestions. The performance review then proceeds as outlined in steps 1 through 6.

THE RATIONALE

The purposes of the performance review are threefold, each of equal value. First, it is to clarify expectations and provide standards of excellence for teachers to strive for in the department. The aim of this is to encourage a consistently high quality of teaching in CELE, without imposing rules or strict requirements, and to set clear expectations for program participation. Second, the performance review acts as a tool for professional development through which teachers can develop and hone their skills, and set personal professional goals suited to each individual. Finally, the performance review acts as a basis for communication between each teacher and the vice director about all aspects of the program.

SETTING STANDARDS

Murphey and Sato (2000) explain that, while bottom-up initiated teacher change is ideal, “without top-down changes in coherently expressed missions, visions, and beliefs, many teachers are unlikely to seriously embrace change on their own” (p. 8). This research suggests that the expressed beliefs of administrators was the greatest determinate of teachers’ classroom behaviors. Therefore it is important for administrators to have clear expectations and make them explicit.

In order to promote program quality and consistency, and set clear expectations for program participation, each section of the performance review explicitly states various items to be considered by the individual teachers. Below are two examples taken from the performance review, one from the *Teaching* section and the other from the *Program* section.

[Teaching] Classroom Practice: consider - strategies toward clarity of instructions, level of student involvement/thinking, use of resources (blackboard, texts, AV etc.), treatment of errors, pacing, methods of motivation, engagement of sensory modes (VAK)

[Program] Flexibility and Availability: consider - availability during contracted hours, openness to change, responsiveness to feedback, acceptance of cultural and institutional differences (Thurston, 2001)

The list of criteria ensures that the content of the performance review is consistent from VFM to VFM. Furthermore, it clarifies the expectations of the administration, thus setting program-wide standards and increasing the likelihood that these items will be treated as fundamentally important in the teachers' daily practice. The explicit statement of these items brings consistency to the performance review process and, in turn, participation in the department.

Program standards and reflection

While setting standards within the department has clear organizational advantages for the administration, the reflective nature of the performance review gives teachers the freedom to highlight areas of particular importance or interest to them or to touch on

themes not specifically addressed by the items listed in the review. Consider, for example, the section addressing classroom practice in the *Teaching* portion of the performance review (see Appendix). While there are a number of specific items listed for the teacher to reflect and comment upon, the topics are also broad enough to allow for variation in teacher style and personality. For example, the *Classroom Management* section asks teachers to consider “clarity of expectations & consequences, student use of L1 [and] facilitation of student participation” (Thurston, 2001). Though the intention is to ensure that each teacher considers the above items in making classroom management decisions, they are free to utilize methods and strategies with which they are comfortable. Furthermore, the emphasis is not upon whether or not the teacher addresses various items, but is rather upon how they do so. There are a myriad of ways, for example, in which different VFMs facilitate student participation and all are respected as valid and interesting contributions to the department’s repertoire of ideas. The teacher is also welcome to comment on items not listed. Many VFMs invest themselves in areas of teaching that are not necessarily mandated as part of the FE program or specifically addressed on the performance review form, such as extensive reading. However, they are encouraged to share these efforts during their performance review. In this way, standards for the department are expressed and maintained while teacher individuality is respected.

The reflective nature of the performance review also has a powerful effect upon the effort teachers make in meeting various program expectations. In my experience, telling teachers to, for example, stay on top of interoffice communication, be punctual or be open to change and responsive to feedback (see Appendix, *Program* section) is less effective than asking teachers to evaluate their own efforts in fulfilling these

responsibilities. Through reflection and self-evaluation, the onus of maintaining professional standards shifts from the administration to the individual. After the first performance review, I felt a change for the better in the quality of VFM contributions to the program and the attention VFMs paid to program responsibilities. Self-evaluation is a very effective tool to influence behaviors and has a more positive impact than a top-down request or a reprimand.

A TOOL FOR TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

The Role of Reflection

While maintaining a standard of performance is a clear benefit of the performance review, there is even greater reward in the professional development of each individual teacher. Murphey and Sato (2000) assert that we, as teachers, are lifelong learners and our continual professional development “nudges us to strive for better and to keep our teaching exciting” (p. 8). It is this excitement, I believe, that makes an educational program dynamic.

Penny Ur (1997) defines teacher development as “professional learning by teachers already engaged in professional practice [who further develop their professional abilities] through reflective discussion sessions based on current classroom experience” (p. 2). She goes on to outline key elements of teacher development that distinguish it from teacher training. According to Ur (1997), teacher development programs need to be based on personal experience, self-evaluation and a personal construction of knowledge. They should also be collaborative and empowering. All of these are elements that I sought to make a part of the performance review process.

Many performance reviews, including those that I have been subject to at other institutions, are primarily an evaluation by someone else of the job performance of a subordinate. I, however, wished to incorporate a reflective model for the purposes of personal teacher development. The purpose being not simply to highlight points of strength and weakness from the perspective of another, but to raise, for the CELE teachers, personal awareness of themselves and their teaching to gain deeper knowledge and inspire motivation.

While teachers do tend to become more skilled over time, experience in and of itself is not a sufficient basis for development; it is merely a starting point (Richards, 1994). In fact, research suggests that many classroom practices and strategies are often applied automatically without a great deal of conscious reflection or thought (Parker, as cited in Richards, 1994). In order for experience to play a truly productive role in teacher development, it is necessary to examine it systematically (Richards, 1994).

Self-evaluation and identifying specific areas for improvement

As with Ur, Richards (1994) maintains that self-evaluation is a key element of professional growth. While the comments of an observer of one's teaching can certainly be considered useful sources of information, a depth of understanding that can lead to profound professional growth must come through self-inquiry. Through critical reflection teachers can deepen their understanding, thus creating personal constructions of knowledge. This line of thinking is further supported by such educators and learning theorists as Mezirow, Friere and Kolb who stress that at the heart of all learning lies experience and the way in which we process it through reflection (Kelly, 1997).

Guided Reflection

As stated earlier, teacher development is just one desired outcome of the performance review process. Ur (1997) points out that true teacher development as we have been exploring, is not necessarily a very effective means for bringing about change on its own. It was my intention, therefore, to guide teachers in their reflection into thinking about aspects of their teaching that they might not have otherwise considered. It is for this reason that the performance review includes some specific teaching issues to reflect upon, areas which I deemed important to the quality of instruction for the overall program (see Appendix, *Teaching* section). The *Teaching* section asks VFMs to reflect upon eight sub-sections (lesson planning, goals and objectives, collaboration, classroom practice, classroom management, professional behavior, assessment and feedback, and teaching knowledge). Each sub-section has further items for the teacher to consider, as shown in the following example:

Lesson Planning: consider – lesson appropriateness, short and long term goals, clarity of lesson objectives, variation of activities, 4 skills, different learning styles (Thurston, 2001)

The intention of the various items teachers are asked to consider is to ensure that they strive to incorporate these items into their professional practice.

While the purpose in stating these items explicitly on the performance review form is to encourage teachers to do such things as write objectives for their lessons, vary their activities, and make efforts to address different learning styles, the overall approach to the performance review remains consistent with the reflective model of teacher development. Teachers are better prepared to deal with the multidimensional facets of the

classroom if they have an extensive knowledge and deeper awareness of the different components and dimensions of teaching (Richards, p. 3). The individual items in each sub-section of the performance review guide teacher reflection and thus help to raise the awareness to which Richards refers. At the same time, the final point on the *Teaching* segment of the performance review form encourages teachers to independently seek out further knowledge.

Goal Setting

Rebecca Oxford (1990) likens students without goals to “boats without rudders; they do not know where they are going, so they might never get there” (p. 156). I think this analogy can be applied to any group of learners, including teachers who continue to develop their craft.

The final stage of the performance review, the *Goals* section, allows teachers to set their own standards for professional growth. Through the process of self-evaluation, teachers become more informed about their teaching. Teachers who are better informed as to the nature of their teaching are able to evaluate their stage of professional growth and the aspects of their teaching they need to develop or change (Richards, 1994). The goal-setting stage of the review is intended to help teachers focus on developing aspects of their professional life that are important to them. It is intended to personalize the performance review even further than the above reflective process. The plan that teachers prepare helps to guide them toward the achievement of their goals. From this section of the review, the vice director also learns how to best assist the individual teachers' personal professional growth and can thus provide opportunities and support to that end.

A BASIS FOR COMMUNICATION WITH THE ADMINISTRATION

Promoting a Sense of Investment in the Program

Throughout the reflective performance review process, I see my role as acting as a sounding board for ideas; helping VFMs outline realistic, achievable plans for professional growth; and giving them a voice in administrative decision-making. Through the performance review meetings, teachers have a chance not only to explore their teaching and program-related efforts in depth, but also to contribute feedback on program-related issues. Thus, the vice director gets a clearer sense of what is going on in and out of VFM classrooms and can make adjustments to the program as well as set goals for the future.

It is my belief that it is crucial for administrators to encourage teacher participation in administrative decision making in order for teachers to feel a sense of investment in the program. Murphey and Sato (2000) cite Pierce as having said that allowing for teacher input “seems crucial to developing the feeling that one is not ‘subject to’ the administrative discourse but rather ‘subject of’ and a shaper of this discourse” (p. 9). When teachers feel they can make contributions to decisions affecting the program, they feel more part of a community and will want to contribute even more (Murphey, 2000). The rapport that is built and the ideas exchanged, then, in the performance review meetings are key to the health and development of the program as a whole.

Facilitating Collaboration and Community

“Perhaps one of the most important contributing elements [for the improvement of teaching] is the development of rapport and respect between people engaged in

communities of learners” (Murphey, 2000). Murphey and Sato outline ingredients they believe facilitate the forming of communities of teachers as learners where teachers can develop. These ingredients include mutual respect, structures for open communication, permission to explore and fail, security that voices will be taken seriously and the encouragement of experimentation and improvement (p. 10). This reflects the spirit with which I developed and continue to approach the performance review process. The research of Kieinsasser and Savignon (as cited in Murphey, 2000) suggests that environments within which teachers collaborate are characterized by confident, dynamic instructors who incorporate more communicative activities into their teaching. The meetings between the vice director and the CELE teachers are collaborative in nature, providing an opportunity to explore one’s teaching in depth. The process both provides a model for and sets the tone for further collaboration. In addition, both the *Teaching* and *Program* sections of the performance review form ask teachers to comment on their collaborative efforts. In these ways, the performance review is intended to encourage communication among VFMs and promote a collaborative community in CELE, within which we strive to improve the program together.

CONCLUSION

It is my opinion that the performance review system has helped to bring consistency to the CELE department, inspired motivation in teacher professional development, and positively influenced classroom practices. While a variety of other factors could have also contributed to these developments, it immediately seemed apparent to me that there was more overall program cohesion and interest in professional

growth after the performance review system was first implemented. Furthermore, VFMs themselves have given very positive feedback regarding the value of the process. In the words of Nancy Szczepanski, fourth-year VFM, the performance review “is a useful tool which has contributed to an overall increase in the level of professionalism in the department. I feel a real change for the better.”

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Appendix

Asia University Center for English Language Education 2nd Semester Performance Review

NAME:

DATE:

TEACHING

Please indicate HOW you address the following:

1. **Lesson Planning:** consider – lesson appropriateness, short and long term goals, clarity of lesson objectives, variation of activities, 4 skills, different learning styles
2. **Goals and Objectives:** consider – individual lessons and syllabus, measures taken toward achievement of goals and objectives
3. **Collaboration:** consider – ideas, activities, materials, receptiveness to feedback
4. **Classroom Practice:** consider – strategies toward clarity of instructions, level of student involvement/thinking, use of resources (blackboard, texts, AV etc.), treatment of errors, pacing, methods of motivation, engagement of sensory modes (VAK)
5. **Classroom Management:** consider - clarity of expectations & consequences, student use of L1, facilitation of student participation
6. **Professional Behavior:** consider - punctuality, teacher-student & student-student relationships, content appropriateness
7. **Assessment and Feedback:** consider - feedback both for and from students
8. **Teaching Knowledge:** consider - current knowledge and initiatives to increase knowledge of SLA theory, methodologies, and teaching techniques

VICE DIRECTOR'S COMMENTS:

PROGRAM

Please indicate HOW you address the following:

1. **Professionalism:** consider - attitude in the workplace, accuracy & punctuality of program work, professional development.
2. **Interpersonal Relations:** consider - CELE and KKB staff
3. **Flexibility and Availability:** consider - availability during contracted hours, openness to change, responsiveness to feedback, acceptance of cultural and institutional differences
4. **Collaboration:** consider - contributions to the overall program, implementation of new systems & ideas, input during meetings
5. **Committee Responsibilities:** consider - initiative and contributions
6. **Inter-office Communications:** consider - responsibility toward internal communications, initiative in referencing available sources of information (CELE Handbook, contract, etc.)
7. **Project:** consider - effort, product, responsibility to project group (if applicable)

VICE DIRECTOR'S COMMENTS:

GOALS

2000-2001 academic year:

Reflections on the goals set at the beginning of this academic year.

1. Goal
Progress:
2. Goal:
Progress:
3. Goal:
Progress:

New goals for the 2001-2002 academic year:

VFM and CELE Vice Director have agreed upon the following Professional Goals for the upcoming semester.

- 1. Goal:
 Plan:

- 2. Goal:
 Plan:

I have met with the CELE Vice Director to discuss the above evaluation.

Signature of VFM

Signature of Vice Director